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STATE FOR INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KPAO](#) [CA](#)
SUBJECT: JOHN WILLIAMSON: NEW DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
FOR PM HARPER

REF: OTTAWA 658

Classified By: A/PolCouns Kurt van der Walde for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
)

¶1. (C) Summary: In an August 27 shake-up of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) senior political staff, Prime Minister Stephen Harper named John Williamson as the new Director of Communications, the fourth in as many years. A strong fiscal conservative, Williamson does not have a high public profile, despite his six-year presidency of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) and serving as editorialist at the National Post newspaper. CTF's success in reaching out directly to taxpayers, bypassing traditional media outlets, likely played a strong role in his selection since the Conservative Party has emphasized this tactic recently. End Summary.

A CAUTIOUS BACKGROUND PLAYER

¶2. (C) Williamson has been a member of Harper's inner circle since 2002 when he was part of Harper's campaign to assume leadership of the Canadian conservative movement. However, neither then nor later did he figure as a key decision-maker in Harper's inner circle, according to media and political commentators. Embassy staff who had direct interaction with Williamson while he was CTF's federal director described him as a "lightweight" and as "nervous and cautious" in his media appearances. He seldom strayed from his talking points and seemed more comfortable out of the spotlight. Political bloggers believe he will likely play a "background role" as director of communications and avoid the brunt of day-to-day questioning by the press. While the press is reporting that Williamson is replacing Kory Teneycke in the PMO, he appears to be assuming senior advisor Carolyn Stewart-Olsen's role as the principal director of communications strategy. As part of the PMO shake-up, Harper also announced that Dmitri Soudas will be the chief spokesman and lead press briefings for the PMO, not Williamson.

A FOCUS ON CONSERVATIVE POLICY RATHER THAN OPERATIONS

¶3. (U) A native of New Brunswick, since 2003 Williamson has served as a research fellow with two established conservative think-tanks, The Fraser Institute and the Manning Centre for Building Democracy, and as federal director of the CTF, a lobbying organization for lower taxes and less government spending. Most recently, he has been a Chevening Scholar at the London School of Economics since 2008 and is currently finishing his dissertation. In his occasional National Post op-ed columns, Williamson was a consistent critic of the Harper government's fiscal policies and the increasing federal deficit, decrying the government's stimulus plan and increased levels of spending. In media and public

appearances as CTF federal director, Williamson focused his criticisms more on the spending programs than on lowering taxes. Neither as lobbyist or editorialist has Williamson offered new initiatives or operational advice for the Conservative Party. Rather, he has stayed comfortably in the "well-worn paths" of "less spending and smaller government," according to newspaper editorialists.

EFFORTS TO BYPASS TRADITIONAL MEDIA

14. (C) Conservative Party executive director Dan Hilton told Pol MinCouns recently that the Conservative Party is continuing efforts to speak directly to voters and expand its social networking web-based communications. He mentioned Qsocial networking web-based communications. He mentioned specifically the Conservative Party's desire to emulate the success of the Obama campaign's email lists and grassroots organization. A major CTF strategy has been to bypass national media to broadcast its messages to its members and the public through regional media, talk radio, and direct email. While Williamson's appointment caught much of the Ottawa media by surprise, this dovetailing of communications strategy by the CTF and the Conservative Party likely pushed Williamson's name up the short-list.

15. (C) Comment: The selection of John Williamson, in conjunction with the highly unpopular (with the press) Dmitri Soudas, as the new communications team in the PMO emphasizes Harper's dismissive attitude toward the Parliamentary Press Gallery and will not improve his already poor relations with it. Press reports that Williamson was Harper's third choice

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for the position are not surprising given the demands of the job and the increasing likelihood of a federal election within the next six months, and possibly six weeks. More experienced conservative communications strategists likely are avoiding a position that has a high risk of ending their career should the Conservatives lose. Williamson may serve a similarly short time in the position as his predecessors since Harper will have a wider field from which to choose if he wins.

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